

La malinche's position in colonial gender hierarchy structure



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Analyse how different representations of Malintzin / ' La Malinche ' by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Hernan Cortés and Octavio Paz lay the groundwork for, or critically engage with the legacy of, colonial gender hierarchies.

Introduction:

There has never been a written agenda for a hierarchical structure during colonial bearings, yet, individuals knew their rank in the system. This was seen through the transculturation of the Spanish conquest to abolish the Aztec Empire. Malintzin was a key figure through the conquest as she “ served as the interpreter” (Lenchek, 1997), translating Nahuatl to Mayan. In addition, sources claim that “ Malintzin is one of the few women who has not been invisible in history” (Godayol, 2012: P. 61). Throughout Malintzin’s life, she has been a representation of many levels of the colonial gender hierarchy. This essay is going to analyse La Malinche’s different positions in the society’s hierarchy also how male opinions of her, correlate or oppose the colonial gender hierarchy structure.

Contextual analysis:

Through historian accounts we learn that Malintzin was born to a noble Aztec family therefore, enabling her to a better education than most Indigenous Mexicans considering she was higher on the social hierarchy at birth. Hence, the suffix ‘-tzin’ in Malintzin conveying elevated hierarchy standing.

Subsequently, after the death of her father, her mother remarried and gave Malintzin to a Cacique for slavery and proclaimed her dead. Forcing Malintzin to the bottom of the social hierarchy, losing her social standing.

Chasteen (2011) affirms that Latin America had struggled with the colonial hierarchy but had to adjust.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo:

Bernal Díaz del Castillo is the only author to name Malintzin, Doña Marina throughout his whole text. This depicts an image unlike Cortés and Paz, it is a positive image that is furthered through descriptions like “ she was truly a great chieftainess” (Díaz, 1585: p. 82). Díaz had written his book over 40 years after the conquest and thus his recollection of Malintzin may have been filtered through many years of remembering. Nevertheless, Díaz was at the conquest first-hand and therefore must have remembered such a significant part of his life.

Gladys Illarregui (2006) claims that the reason for Diaz’s positive outlook on Malintzin could have been from their shared experiences as ‘ opposites’ in regards to the hierarchical structure.

Díaz (1585) explains that Doña Marina was Malintzin’s name once christened. Yet, Doña has an elevated hierarchy status, Díaz was not reticent nor repentant on identifying Malintzin as Doña Marina, unlike Cortés or Paz. This opposes the gender hierarchy of Latin America considering Malintzin was an Indigenous woman. Indigenous individuals were described as “ biologically inferior” (Wade 2017: p. 625) and from a “ degenerative process” (Wade, 2017: p. 625). This conveys the respect that Bernal Díaz del Castillo had for La Malinche, regardless of the fact that she was an Indigenous woman. As Díaz had a positive memory of Malintzin, this pushes the boundaries of gender stereotyping and Latin American hierarchy and <https://assignbuster.com/la-malinches-position-in-colonial-gender-hierarchy-structure/>

thus could infer that these colonial hierarchies are the subject to the opinions of individuals. Or even, hierarchies were in place to construct order and direction for individuals, which is more like Cortés' beliefs.

Hernán Cortés:

Malintzin is a key representation of how enslaved Indigenous women were treated like an economic resource system, used by their owners and passed to another. As Díaz (1585) illustrates that Malintzin was gifted to Cortés by the Cacique of Tabasco. Which conveys the colonial hierarchy as we are aware that Malintzin was significantly important for Cortés, and according to Cypess (1991) in his letters written back to the Spanish court, he mentioned Malintzin twice, yet only once declaring her name, thus leaving her relatively silent. Cortés may have seen Malintzin as an Indigenous stereotype and used her skills to express his superiority in his letters. Therefore, Malintzin had laid the groundwork for Indigenous colonial social standing because as Spain had hegemony over Mexico; the Spanish had hegemony over the Indigenous.

In Cortés' letter to Emperor Carlos V, he claims that he had observed signs "because of the signs I had observed" (Cortés, 1522: p. 73). Whereas, prior to this he claimed that the Indian interpreter (meaning Malintzin) told him that "Mutezuma's men ... were about to fall on us and kill us all" (Cortés, 1522: p. 73). Quite clearly, this exemplifies the point that Cortés tried to make it sounds like he dominated, yet the truth may have been different because, without Malintzin translating languages, the situation may have been much different.

Malintzin and Cortés did have the first nationally recognised Mestizo child, and Wade (2017) argues that in the past males believed women to be a reproductive blessing. Again, giving the postulation that women are only useful for the desires of a man, hence conveying how it was a patriarchal society and how Cortés may have been a chauvinist. Cortés may have wanted his legacy to continue through his child. As it was a patriarchal society, Indigenous women like Malintzin did not have a choice on their actions, she was forced and as an Indigenous, despite being a translator for Cortés, she did not have a voice to speak out from.

Octavio Paz:

Octavio Paz has very strong outlooks on Malintzin in his recognised book 'The Sons of Malinche' which have been the centre of "the textual interlocutor of most writings about Malinche" (Tate, 2017: p. 84). "The symbol of this violation is Doña Malinche" (Paz, 1950: p. 86). This is an example of the way that Paz uses similes and metaphorical structure in his text to relate Mexico and women as an enigmatic quality. Suggesting the patriarchal society and view that men had on women in colonial bearings, slumping women to the bottom of the colonial hierarchy. We see this through quotes, for instance, "the Chingada" (Paz, 1950: p. 75) relating to the loss of identity of Malintzin but also the fall of the Aztec Empire, losing its identity. Robinson (2012) claims that Paz believed that La Chingada relates to Malintzin surrendering herself to foreign influences. Yet, historians, but more importantly texts from the 16th century have argued that Malintzin did not have a choice, hence the argument previously relating to her as a submissive object being passed around.

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Conclusion:

Malintzin has been an illustration of how forceful males in colonial bearings can be. Although nowadays, Malintzin is regarded as a counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe, a transcultural figure of acceptance for men and women, this is seen through the women's culture of Marianismo. Robinson (2012) claims that writings of many Chicana women including Gloria Anzaldúa; use Malintzin as an advocate for empowerment in Mexican identity. Considering Cortés laid boundaries for Mexican hierarchy, Malintzin could be seen as breaking the hierarchy boundaries once she bore him a child. Therefore, in the past, Malintzin was seen as a lower-class Indigenous woman, yet nowadays is still a pioneer for empowerment in Mexican women.

Word count - 1099

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